

Studies in English, New Series

Volume 3 *Poe-Purri: Edgar Allan Poe Issue*

Article 15

1982

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New York, New York

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Recommended Citation

Mabbott, Maureen Cobb (1982) "Reading “The Raven”," *Studies in English, New Series*: Vol. 3 , Article 15.
Available at: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/studies_eng_new/vol3/iss1/15

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READING "THE RAVEN"*

MAUREEN COBB MABBOTT

NEW YORK, NEW YORK

"The Raven" is Poe's most famous composition. Like the short stories it was written to please all kinds of readers and it was immediately successful. Not only was it copied in countless newspapers at once, but it soon was to be found in textbooks and anthologies. Since it is, despite its elaborate metrical ornamentation, a straightforward narrative, it can be and has been translated into every major language. Woodberry wrote of it: 'No great poem ever established itself so immediately, so widely, and so imperishably, in men's minds.' So begins the commentary on "The Raven" in Thomas Ollive Mabbott's edition of Poe's *Poems*.¹

As the continuing discussion shows, Poe himself believed that he had written a masterpiece, but he could not forbear the flippant remark, often repeated: "The Raven has had a great run ... but I wrote it for the express purpose of running—just as I did 'The Gold Bug' ... the bird beat the bug, though, all hollow."²

Masterpiece or not, "The Raven" is a poem for the ear, a natural for a listening audience. In the *Memoirs* of Anne Lynch Botta, published in 1894, it was said that Poe read "The Raven" publicly for the first time at one of the literary evenings of Anne Charlotte Lynch (afterwards Botta) at 116 Waverly Place in New York.

We do know that the author's reading of this poem was an often repeated event at various literary evenings in New York during the winters of 1845 and 1846. If it is true that Anne Lynch trapped the lion for the first reading, then we know exactly when that occurred. As is well known, my husband was a collector of coins, fifteenth-century prints and American letters. In October 1956 Miss Mary Benjamin sent him word that a letter with a Poe connection had come into her autograph shop. It reads as follows:

My dear Mr. Poe,

I was very sorry not to find you at home when I called on Mrs. Poe the other day. I wanted to ask you what I am now going to write, that is, if you will not come here on Saturday evening & read your poem or some passages from it. Of course you will say "It is too warm" but I do not believe it will ever be any cooler so if that is to be your objection you must not refuse me. Let me hear your

*A slightly different version of this article formed the keynote address for the sixtieth anniversary of The Edgar Allan Poe Society, 7 May 1982, in Baltimore, Maryland.

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decision so that I may ask a few friends if you consent. Do you know Mr. William Wallace? I should be happy to make his acquaintance. I like his "Gods of Greece" so much.

Remember me to Mrs. Poe. I hope she is better. I must tell you how much pleasure I took in reading your Tales and in knowing that they are a selection from *Seventy* all of which I hope to read. They are unsurpassed by any stories I have ever read in power of language and force of imagination. More of them when I see you.

Thursday July 17
116 Waverly Place

Truly yours,³
Anne C. Lynch

First, of course, the reader needs to know which of Mr. Poe's poems is "your poem," referred to in this letter, and what is the date—no year is given. A universal calendar tells us that the year was 1845, and that leads to easy identification of the poem. "The Raven" had by the date of Anne Lynch's letter (17 July 1845) appeared in the New York *Evening Mirror* on 29 January, in the February number of the *American Review*, in the March number of the *Southern Literary Messenger*, in the New-York *Tribune* on 4 February, in the *Broadway Journal* on 8 February, and in the London *Critic* on 14 June.

We also remember that the very first printing, in the *Evening Mirror*, had been given a great sendoff by N. P. Willis's famous introduction in which he had said, among other things: "In our opinion, it is the most effective single example of 'fugitive poetry' ever published in this country, and unsurpassed in English poetry for subtle conception and masterly ingenuity of versification." Certainly "your poem" was "The Raven."

I can find no report of how Poe read "The Raven" on that particular warm evening at Miss Lynch's, where her friends knew there was an "evening" if they saw a lighted lamp inside the living room at 116 Waverly Place. But there are accounts of how the author read the immediately famous work at other times. Some are non-descriptive, as "he electrified the company" and the Boston *Museum* statement: "Mr. Poe recited that remarkable poem in a manner that never will be repeated." Elmira Shelton is supposed to have said that he got very excited, and Mrs. Jane Clark said that she heard Poe recite "The Raven" in a voice like Edwin Booth's. No doubt he read it differently on different occasions.

There is, however, a sober and authoritative account by Sara Helen Whitman in her Introductory Letter to Eugene Didier's *Life and Poems of Poe* (1876). She had been in Providence and had received

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reports in letters from her New York friends. I quote from this Introductory Letter:

To reinforce my memory on the subject I have just referred to letters received from various correspondents during the winters of 1845 and 1846 in all of which the name of the poet frequently appears. In one letter, dated January 7, 1846, I find the following, "I meet Mr. Poe very often at the receptions. He is the observed of all observers. His stories are thought wonderful and to hear him repeat the Raven, which he does very quietly, is an event in one's life."

But life, as no one knew better than Edgar Poe, is shot through with mysterious interlocking and unperceived connections. Even before he read his poem at Anne Lynch's, on 19 July 1845, there had appeared in his own magazine, the *Broadway Journal*, the advertisement of a book that was going to change the quiet reading to an elocutionary performance. On 19 April 1845, on page 265, appeared:

VANDENHOFF'S ELOCUTION

A PLAIN SYSTEM OF ELOCUTION: OR, LOGICAL and Musical Reading and Declamation, with Exercises in Prose and Verse, distinctly marked for the guidance of the Ear and Voice of the Pupil: to which is added, AN APPENDIX, containing a copious Practice in Oratorical, Poetical, and Dramatic Reading and Recitation: the whole forming a Complete Speaker, well adapted to private pupils, classes, and the use of schools; by G. VANDENHOFF, Professor of Elocution in the City of New York. Second Edition. Published by C. SHEPARD, 191 Broadway, opposite John st.

Almost 100 years later, one day late in 1942, this advertisement struck the eyes of a Poe scholar with a new significance, for he had suddenly perceived an hitherto unperceived connection. Tom Mabbott had in 1942 completed one of his careful studies of Poe's works, this time of *The Raven and Other Poems*, published by Columbia University Press for the Facsimile Text Society. In his investigation he had made absolutely sure that although the copyright date of *The Raven and Other Poems* was 12 September 1845, the book was not published until late in November. Earlier he had learned that Vandenhoff's Second Edition contained "The Raven." Now, looking at the advertisement in the 19 April issue of the *Broadway Journal*, a copy of which he owned, it occurred to him that *A Plain System of Elocution*

must have appeared in print before *The Raven and Other Poems*. Was the first book publication of "The Raven" in a book on elocution? It was—as he proved by means of evidence presented in the New York Public Library *Bulletin* of August 1943. It is an article familiar to Poe scholars but not mentioned in the *Poems* volume of his *Collected Works of...Poe*. Under description of the text it is stated only that the first book printing was an unauthorized one in Vandenhoff's *A Plain System of Elocution*, Second Edition. Moreover, as the text descriptions were not indexed, Vandenhoff's name does not appear in the index of *Poems*. Today it is an obscure piece of information, this first book publication of "The Raven," but in the summer of 1943 it was front page news. I quote from the New York *Times* of 14 August 1943, under a two-column headline:

FIRST BOOK PUBLICATION OF "THE RAVEN"
CREDITED TO OBSCURE ELOCUTION MANUAL

N.Y. Times

14 Aug. '43

After waiting nearly a century, a nondescript and hitherto inconsequential book called "A Plain System of Elocution" may break into the ranks of those elect volumes known as collectors' items.

This antique owes its new interest not to any merit as a collection of "exercises in prose and verse, distinctly marked for the guidance of the ear and voice of the pupil," but to the fact that it now appears to be a first edition in book form of one of the most famous poems ever written in America, "The Raven," by Edgar Allan Poe.

After decades of research, bibliographers had believed that the first appearance in book form of this work was in Poe's own volume, "The Raven and Other Poems," issued late in 1845. Earlier in that same year the poem had been issued separately almost simultaneously in *The New York Evening Mirror* and in *The American Review*. A first edition of "The Raven and Other Poems" is a "must" for all collectors of Poe. A copy with wrappers, in good condition, brings from \$500 to \$1,000 or more in the market here.

The discovery of the new Poe item will be announced officially next week in the August issue of *The Bulletin* of the New York Public Library, in an article by Thomas Ollive Mabbott, educator and Poe scholar.

"The Raven" appeared in the second edition of "A Plain System of Elocution," together with such pieces from the standard repertoire

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of amateur spellbinders of the time as Bryant's "Thanatopsis" and Hamlet's soliloquy. The book was written by George Vandenhoff, "Professor of Elocution in the City of New York," a son of the famous English actor, John M.

Mr. Mabbott dates the appearance of Poe's "The Raven and Other Poems" as November, 1845. Research convinces him that the earlier appearance of the Vandenhoff volume was "not a matter of a few days but of several weeks or months."

How rare the heretofore obscure work on elocution is, Mr. Mabbott has not had time yet to determine. Copies are owned by The New York Public Library, Harvard and Brown Universities, and the British Museum. Its potential market value will depend on its rarity and the demand by collectors.

"It is certainly amusing," Mr. Mabbott writes, "to find that the poem, which has been so frequently recited (and so often murdered) by elocutionists, began its book career in a textbook for the practice of the art and in a mangled version at that."⁴

The 'proof positive' of the first book publication was not in this widely read and copied journalistic account but, as I have said, in an article in the *Bulletin* of the New York Public Library. A fact of interest to us here is that we have no record of Vandenhoff's asking Poe's consent. He did not have to do so, for "The Raven" was not copyrighted.

Although we may seem to have left our subject behind, we are still talking about the reading of "The Raven," and the *Publisher's Weekly* account of the Mabbott find recalls it to us. In the 11 September 1943 issue we read:

Back in the fall of 1845 the whining schoolboy, creeping like a snail unwillingly to school probably had very little love for the books he carried, and if, as was so often the case, he happened to be in an advanced class where elocution was part of the curriculum, there is a good possibility that the book he read from (with appropriate gestures) was the second edition of George Vandenhoff's *A Plain System of Elocution*. The book had little to distinguish it from any of the other similar publications that plagued the schoolboy of the pre-Delsartean age. It contained "exercises in prose and verse, distinctly marked for the guidance of the ear and voice of the pupil"; it contained "an appendix, containing a copious practice in oratorical, poetical, and dramatic reading and recitation"; it also contained, did this second edition of Vandenhoff's *Plain System of Elocution*, the earliest known book appearance of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven."

Although the effects of the elocution connection were lamentable, there have been many good post-Vandenhoff readings of "The Raven," of course, and I can report on one by a Poescholar who was as familiar as anyone I know with the way Mr. Poe, after all the excitement had died down, would have wished it read. Late in the 1940's, in a large room at the top of the Allerton House in New York, the president of the New York Edgar Allan Poe Society, Professor Thomas Mabbott, seated beside a table by the light of one candle, held an audience waiting, listening, learning as he read the 108 lines of "The Raven" in a clear, quiet voice. Later, after his edition of the *Poems* was published by Harvard Press, an anonymous reviewer in the London Times *Literary Supplement*, softening his expression of the English impatience with Poe's "Pianola-like effects," wrote: "Professor Mabbott himself was said to be an exquisitely skilful reader in public of certain poems one would have supposed impossible to resurrect except in parody."⁵ He went on to mention "Ulalume" and "To Helen." The anonymous reviewer, I am sure, did not hear Professor Mabbott read "The Raven" that night at the Allerton House. Those who did felt that it was "an event in one's life," to quote again the unknown informant's account of Poe's own reading in 1845.

NOTES

¹ *M*, 1: 350.

² In a letter to F. W. Thomas, 4 May 1845—*M*, 1: 351.

³ Anne Lynch's letter, now in the Pierpont Morgan Library, is quoted by permission of Charles A. Ryskamp, Director.

⁴ According to the *New York Times*, 6 February 1981, at Christie's in New York City a copy of *The Raven and Other Poems*, first edition, brought \$24,000 in a sale of Marjorie Wiggins Prescott's books.

⁵ 22 January 1971, p. 96.